

What Do Palestinians Want?

It's time to take a close look at an often ignored subject: what ordinary Palestinians think about Israel, Jews, and terrorist attacks on civilians.



Masked Palestinian youths use slingshots to hurl rocks and marbles at an Israeli military checkpoint in Bethlehem, West Bank on October 23, 2015. Anna Ferensowicz/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images.

ESSAY

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About the author

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The most recent wave of Palestinian terror attacks, now entering its second month, has been mainly the work of “lone wolf” operators running over Israeli civilians, soldiers, and policemen with cars or stabbing them with knives. The perpetrators, many in or just beyond their teenage years, are not, for the most part, activists in the leading militant organizations. They have been setting forth to find targets with the expectation, generally fulfilled, that after scoring a casualty or two they will be killed or badly wounded. What drives these young Palestinians, experts say, is a viral social-media campaign centered on claims that the Jews are endangering the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and that Israel is executing Palestinian children.

Pundits and analysts in Israel and the West, struck by the elements that make this round of violence different from its predecessors over the past decade-and-a-half—which typically featured well-orchestrated shootings, suicide bombings, or rocket fire—have focused on the motivations of individual attackers, on how and why the Palestinian political and religious leadership has been engaging

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Absent almost entirely from this discussion has been any attempt to understand the perspective of everyday Palestinians. Yet it is precisely the climate of public opinion that shapes and in turn is shaped by the declarations of Palestinian leaders, and that creates the atmosphere in which young people choose whether to wake up in the morning, pull a knife from the family kitchen, and go out in search of martyrdom. Whether commentators are ignoring the views of mainstream Palestinians out of a mistaken belief that public opinion does not matter in dictatorships, or out of a dismissive sense that they are powerless pawns whose fate is decided by their leaders, Israel, or regional and world powers, the omission is both patronizing and likely to lead to significant misunderstandings of what is happening. In this essay I aim to fill the lacuna by addressing what Palestinians think both about violence against Israelis and about the core issues that supply its context and justification.

My interest in Arab public opinion in the West Bank and Gaza is longstanding, dating back to the time regular surveying began there shortly before the 1993 Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO. In 1996, I appeared on a panel with Khalil Shikaki, the pioneering director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR); since then, I have been increasingly impressed with his insights and his institute's professionalism. I therefore took particular notice of a [PSR survey](#) that appeared after the August 2014 ceasefire ending the latest war between Israel and Hamas. It reported, among other findings, that fully 79 percent of Palestinians believed Hamas had won the war and only 3 percent saw Israel as the victor. So convinced were respondents of their side's strength that nine in ten favored continued rocket fire at Israel's cities unless the blockade of Gaza were lifted, 64 percent declared their support for "armed attacks against Israeli civilians inside Israel" (meaning, among other things, suicide bombings in Israeli population centers), and 54 percent applauded the event that in large measure had precipitated the 50-day war: the abduction and murder by Hamas operatives of three Israeli teenage boys hitchhiking home from school.

In the ensuing months, I read further polls from PSR and other research institutes to see whether support for violence would drop appreciably once the emotions fired by war had cooled. Yet despite a modest decline over time in most indicators, a majority continued to support virtually every kind of attack against Israelis about which they were asked—including rocket fire, suicide bombings, and stabbings. These and other findings led me back to the polls conducted in earlier years, and eventually to embarking on a comprehensive analysis of all reliable and publicly available surveys in the West Bank and Gaza over the past two decades.

For this project, I examined over 330 surveys carried out by the four major Palestinian research institutes, each of which has been conducting regular polls for a decade or more: the [PSR headed by Shikaki](#) and its predecessor, [CPRS](#); the [Jerusalem Media and Communications Center \(JMCC\)](#); the [Birzeit Center for Development Studies \(CDS\)](#), whose work was later continued under the same director by the [Arab World for Research & Development \(AWRAD\)](#); and the [Opinion Polls and Survey Research Unit of An-](#)

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English (and generally in Arabic).

Although commentators typically describe the four as having differing perspectives, all are independent of any government, party, or other institutional framework that might introduce systematic bias into their work. All conduct face-to-face interviews; customarily include more than 1,000 people in each survey; use variants of “area-probability” sampling; and train fieldworkers extensively—which means that the margin of error for their polls is typically 3 to 5 percent, with a confidence level of 95 percent. Moreover, many of their questions are asked repeatedly over time, making it possible to adjust for momentary swings of opinion. And since the questions asked by the four institutes are themselves often similar, it is possible to compare responses, thus testing the degree to which the findings are or are not affected by the specific perspective or methodology of a given institute.

Tellingly, poll respondents in the West Bank regularly voice strong criticism of President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) government that rules there, while those in Gaza often speak negatively about the Hamas leadership, so it appears that Palestinians are not cowed from giving their honest opinions. The consensus among informed scholars is therefore that the surveys are reliable, valid, and genuinely reflective of what Arab residents of the West Bank and Gaza think.

I also examined data from two international institutes that have conducted parallel surveys among residents in the West Bank/Gaza and in Arab and Muslim countries: the Pew Research Center, which since 2002 has included countries in the Middle East in its annual global surveys, and the Arab Barometer initiative, a consortium founded by Princeton University and the University of Michigan that since 2006 has overseen three waves of polling in the Middle East. To round out the picture, I incorporated a handful of surveys carried out by Palestinian polling firms on behalf of well-known international experts.

In what follows, I focus on three related questions: What do Palestinians think of Israel and of Jews? How do they view the Jewish claim to at least a part of the land of Israel, and especially Jerusalem? And what do they believe about the legitimacy, efficacy, and desirability of carrying out terrorist attacks against Israelis? My hope is that, on the basis of these findings, I can provide a better sense of what lies behind the current wave of violence and perhaps stimulate discussion about how it might be curbed.

I. What Palestinians Think of Israel

Since the establishment of the PA in 1994, the Palestinians have been beset by problems. The government has increasingly been viewed as corrupt, undemocratic, and unable to enforce law and order or to reform itself. The economy has generally been weak, infrastructure sub-par, and the PA unable at times to pay salaries. Since Hamas took over Gaza in 2007, the Palestinian state-in-the-making has been divided, with Fatah continuing to rule the West Bank and all efforts at reconciliation a failure. The peace process

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authority to the PA has been far slower than envisioned in the Oslo accords.

Who is responsible for the problems plaguing the Palestinians? During the last two decades, the four institutes whose surveys I examined have asked numerous questions on this subject, and on 53 occasions have offered Israel as one of the possible answers. In all but one case, Israel was the answer most widely chosen, usually by a statistically significant margin—including when it came to problems that at least at first glance seemed largely internal. Among these were clashes between PA police and Hamas that left thirteen dead (1994), Palestinian economic problems (2000), the hindering of political reform in the PA (2001), Mahmoud Abbas's decision to resign as prime minister (2003), lack of law and order in PA-held territories (2004), the blocking of reform in the PA (2004), the Hamas coup that wrested control of Gaza from Fatah (2007), a water crisis in the West Bank and Gaza (2010), a fuel shortage in Gaza (2012), the inability of the PA to pay its employees (2013), and the ongoing inability of Hamas and Fatah to reconcile (2015).

A large majority of Palestinians were convinced that Israel sought deliberately to target civilians, and held Hamas blameless for positioning its leadership, fighters, and weapons in populated areas.

In matters that necessarily involved both Israel and the Palestinians, massive majorities blamed Israel and denied any responsibility on their side. Cases in point include the suspension of negotiations between Israel and the PLO (1997), the failure of talks at Camp David (2000), the breakdown of a ceasefire during the second intifada (2003), the collapse of the peace process (2004), the outbreak of the first Gaza war (2008), the non-implementation of the Oslo accords (2012), the outbreak of the second Gaza war (2012), and the breakdown of negotiations between the sides and the third Gaza war (2014).

So convinced were Palestinians that Israel was responsible for the Gaza wars, for example, that after each conflict, when asked by JMCC pollsters whether they believed it was “possible for the Palestinian side to avoid it, or was Israel planning to launch the war in all cases,” overwhelming majorities averred that Israel was intending to go to war regardless of Palestinian actions. Likewise, a large majority of Palestinians were convinced that Israel sought deliberately to target civilians, and held Hamas blameless for positioning its leadership, fighters, and weapons in populated areas.

Over the years, there were also many questions posed about problems for which Israel wasn't listed as a possible culprit; on these, respondents assigned blame to their government, to leading figures and parties, or to society as a whole. But when Israel was offered as an option, both where its culpability could plausibly be claimed and where doing so was farfetched in the extreme, more Palestinians passed responsibility to Israel than opted for any other answer. Whatever else this might say, it indicates a tendency to ascribe to Israel greater power than it actually wields—along with intentions so diabolical as to lead it to act in ways detrimental to the

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The perception of Israel as implacably hostile and even demonic affects responses to questions not only about the past and present but also about what Israelis and their government are likely to do vis-à-vis the Palestinians in the future. For instance: as anyone observing Israeli politics over the last decade is aware, the most widely held position within Israel favors the establishment of a Palestinian state in most or all of the West Bank and Gaza; a minority prefer to increase Palestinian autonomy but with Israel remaining in charge overall. Palestinian polls, however, tell a very different story.

On over two dozen occasions since 2009, PSR fieldworkers asked West Bank and Gaza residents, “What do you think are the aspirations of Israel for the long run?” With clock-like consistency, the options espoused by most of the parties represented in the Israeli Knesset and by consistent majorities of Israelis—namely, that Israel is seeking “withdrawal from all [or part] of the territories it occupied in 1967”—are chosen *least* often. More popular is the belief, held by one-fifth of Palestinians, that Israel’s goal is “Annexation of the West Bank while denying political rights of Palestinian citizens.” But the view commanding an absolute majority in all 25 polls, at an average of 59 percent, is that Israel’s aspirations are “Extending the borders of the state of Israel to cover all the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea and expelling its Arab citizens.”

Assuming one takes respondents at their word, three of every five Palestinians living next door to Israel believe its aspirations are to reconquer the Gaza Strip and the Arab-populated areas of the West Bank, annex them, and expel the more than four million Arab residents currently living there *plus* the 1.7 million Arab citizens of Israel. And this, despite the fact that in the past quarter-century, not a single Israeli Knesset member, respected public figure, or major media personality has advocated such a view in public or is reliably claimed to have expressed it in private.

A majority of Palestinians, 51 percent, assert that Israel will “destroy al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques and build a synagogue in their place.”

It is in this context that one must consider Palestinian public opinion about the area of Jerusalem known by Jews as the Temple Mount and by Muslims as Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary). Here stood the ancient Israelites’ First and Second Temples until the latter was destroyed by the Romans nearly 2,000 years ago, and here for thirteen centuries have been situated the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock. The area, captured by Israel from Jordan during the Six-Day War in 1967, has been administered by Jordanian (and, to a lesser extent, Palestinian) religious officials representing the Islamic Waqf. The status quo, unchanged for a half-century except at the margins, is that Muslims can visit the Temple Mount at all hours and pray at its mosques, while Jews are restricted in their visiting hours, have no structure for worship, and are forbidden from praying even as individuals. In 2014, a few right-wing Israeli politicians did propose modifications that would augment the hours for Jewish visits and enable Jews to pray; since

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will not be changed.

Against that background, on four occasions in the last year PSR asked residents of the West Bank and Gaza for their views on Israel's plans for the Mount. On average, only 11 percent believe Israel will maintain the status quo; 16 percent hold that it will allow Jews to visit any time or to pray there; one-fifth claim that it will "divide the al-Haram area between Muslims and Jews, allowing Jews to establish a synagogue next to al-Aqsa mosque"; while the majority, 51 percent, assert that Israel will "destroy al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques and build a synagogue in their place." Again, a position with no basis in the policies of any of the parties in Israel's governing coalition or opposition is assumed by an absolutely majority of Palestinians to reflect the true intentions of its government.

II. What Palestinians Think of Israelis and Jews

The specific findings noted above fit with a more broadly negative view of Israelis and Jews that Palestinians espouse on the rare occasions when pollsters have given them the opportunity to generalize. In February 1999, JMCC offered survey participants "a list of characteristics that could be used to describe the Israelis" and asked for a score on a scale of 1 to 5. Regarding the first characteristic, "violent," 76 percent gave Israelis the highest rankings, a 4 or 5. On the second trait, "honest," 67 percent scored Israel a 1 or 2. The third trait was "intelligent," and here Palestinians gave Israelis credit, with 61 percent rating them a 4 or 5.

Two years later, with the second intifada well under way, JMCC did a similar poll showing even more pronounced results. The proportion of Palestinians scoring Israelis at 5 for violence went up to 88 percent, with another 7 percent giving them a 4. More than four-fifths saw Israelis as dishonest. In place of "intelligent," JMCC pollsters asked to what extent Israelis were "strong," and here 58 percent of Palestinians gave them high marks.

What emerges, then, is a picture of Israelis as violent and untrustworthy, but clever and strong—which matches up with Palestinian assessments of Israel's outsized power and diabolical nature in its past behavior and future intentions.

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In 2009, the Pew Research Center asked publics in two dozen countries how they viewed Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Regarding Jews, 94 percent of Palestinians reported a "very unfavorable" opinion. (Only 23 percent reported a very unfavorable opinion of Christians.) In this respect, Palestinian views are par for the course in the Arab world: between 92 and 95 percent of

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questions and achieved comparable results. In [the latter survey](#), Pew also asked whether some religions were more prone than others to violence. More than half of Palestinians averred that this is the case, and of these, 88 percent fingered Judaism as the most violent. (The other choices were Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism.)

On the rare occasions when they have been given the opportunity to generalize, Palestinians characterize Israelis as belligerent and untrustworthy but clever and strong, and finger Judaism as the most violent of all religions.

Palestinians also see Jews as lacking a historical tie to the land of Israel or to Jerusalem. In 2011, the American political consultant Stanley Greenberg commissioned [a survey of Palestinians](#) on behalf of The Israel Project. When presented with several statements describing actions that could be viewed as morally right or wrong, 72 percent declared it morally right to deny that “Jews have a long history in Jerusalem going back thousands of years,” while 90 percent declared “Denying that Palestinians have a long history in Jerusalem going back thousands of years” to be morally wrong.

A majority of Palestinians appear to have translated this historical understanding into political conclusions. On fifteen occasions between 2003 and 2014, pollsters from PSR asked whether it would be acceptable, in the framework of a comprehensive agreement for a two-state solution, to divide Jerusalem so the Palestinians would have their capital in eastern Jerusalem and exercise sovereignty over the Arab neighborhoods and the Old City, including Haram al-Sharif, while Israel would be sovereign over Jewish neighborhoods, the Jewish quarter of the Old City, and the Western Wall. On every occasion, respondents soundly rejected the proposal, with opposition almost always exceeding three-fifths. These findings match those of a poll by Bir Zeit’s CDS. No reliable survey to date has shown that a majority of Palestinians are willing to accept such a division of the city.

Given such a negative view of Israelis and of Jews, and of the Jewish link to the land, it is hardly surprising that most ordinary Palestinians do not believe Jews have a right to a state there. In 1995, when JMCC asked whether Israel had a right to exist, 65 percent responded negatively. Similarly, in a [2015 poll](#) commissioned for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy by David Pollock, who has conducted surveys of the Arab world for more than two decades, fieldworkers from the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion asked residents of the West Bank and Gaza: “Do you think that Jews have some rights to the land along with Palestinians?” Only 12 percent agreed that “Both Jews and Palestinians have rights to the land,” while more than 80 percent asserted that “This is Palestinian land and Jews have no rights to it.”

This denial of Jewish roots and rights might help explain why Palestinians are skeptical that Israel, not yet three-quarters of a century old, will continue to exist as a Jewish state, or perhaps at all, in another generation. In 2011, the Greenberg poll asked Palestinians to choose which statement is more accurate: “I am certain Israel will exist 25 years from now as a Jewish state with a

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Washington Institute poll, a similar question was asked, with different wording and a lengthened time horizon. In response, only a quarter of Palestinians believed Israel would continue to exist as a Jewish state “in another 30 or 40 years.” A comparable number thought it would exist as a bi-national state of Jews and Palestinians, while close to half said Israel would no longer exist either “because Arab or Muslim resistance will destroy it” or “because it will collapse from internal contradictions.”

In sum, when the Palestinians look at Israel, they see a country of enormous power and influence that has done great harm to them, that seeks to displace them entirely from historical Palestine, and whose people are deficient as individuals and also lacking any collective rights to the land in general or to Jerusalem in particular.

III. How Palestinians See Violence against Israelis

Palestinian views of Israel hardly provide the fertile ground of trust, respect, or shared assumptions that would facilitate reaching a long-term accommodation or bringing about co-existence. But must they lead to support for *violence* against Israelis? To back such violence, after all, Palestinians must hold a set of views that prejudice them in favor of carrying out actual attacks. To those views we now turn.

On the surface, the decision of ordinary Palestinians to support or not to support the initiative of young people who take knives and go out to attack Jews in Jerusalem’s Old City, or run over Israelis on the roads of the West Bank, seems straightforward enough. Yet views on the use of violence in these and other cases are based on a host of assumptions and attitudes, most of which are probably not considered consciously. In light of the salience of Palestinian violence, and in an effort to understand its contours and origins, pollsters have asked a large variety of questions and compiled a rich body of data. Before examining levels of support for specific kinds of actions, it is valuable to consider the attitudinal evidence, grouped here under three headings.

1. Is Violence against Israelis and Westerners Legitimate?

To what extent do Palestinians see it as morally right and appropriate to use violence against Israelis, or against Westerners more generally? A good place to begin this inquiry is a [PSR poll in December 2001](#), one of whose questions was: “In your opinion, are there any circumstances under which you would justify the use of terrorism to achieve political goals?” Fifty-four percent responded that there were no such circumstances; 37 percent said there were. At first glance, this would indicate the majority’s *rejection* of terrorism on moral grounds, a particularly significant finding since the poll was conducted at the height of the second intifada.

To understand what this finding means in practice, however, we must take into account how Palestinians interpret the word “terrorism.” In that same poll, 98 percent said the 1994 killing of 29

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Palestinian suicide bombers that killed 21 Israelis at the Dolphinarium night club in Tel Aviv. Likewise, 93 percent described as terrorism Israel's August 2001 assassination of the head of the PFLP, a PLO wing that repudiated the Oslo accords and carried out numerous attacks against Israelis, but only 10 percent countenanced the term to describe the PFLP's assassination of the right-wing Israeli government minister Rehavam Ze'evi two months later. When asked hypothetically if Israel's use of chemical or biological weapons against Palestinians would constitute terror, 93 percent said yes, but when the identical question was posed regarding the use of such weapons of mass destruction by Palestinians against Israelis, only 25 percent responded affirmatively.

**98 percent of Palestinians said the killing of 29
Palestinians in Hebron by Baruch Goldstein was
terrorism, but only 15 percent were willing to say the
same for an attack by suicide bombers that killed 21
Israelis in Tel Aviv.**

Also in the same survey, Palestinians were asked whether "The destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City by people suspected to be members of Bin Laden's organization" was terrorism. Only 41 percent were willing to say yes; 53 percent rejected the term. The same pattern crops up in surveys conducted between 2006 and 2009 by the Arab Barometer project, in which Palestinians consistently distinguished themselves from other Arabs in rejecting the term terrorism for such jihadist operations as the "Madrid train explosions" (March 2004, 191 killed) and the "London underground explosions" (July 2005, 52 dead). In both cases, a majority of Palestinians averred these were not acts of terror, whereas comparable figures in the other Arab publics ranged from 17 percent down to 2 percent.

This highly differentiated usage of "terrorism" affects the wording of all surveys conducted among Palestinians. In describing attacks by Arabs on Westerners or Israelis, pollsters therefore resort to more acceptable formulations like "resistance operations," "military operations," "armed attacks against Israeli civilians in Israel," and the like.

Palestinian attitudes toward the legitimacy of violence can be further understood from a second set of international polls by Pew. On six occasions in the last decade, Pew asked the following question in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as in Muslim and Arab countries: "Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified. Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often justified, sometimes justified, rarely justified, or never justified?" Though the level of support varied widely among countries and across time, one constant is that the Palestinians were always the leaders in seeing suicide bombings and similar attacks as justified. On average, 59 percent saw them as being justified often or sometimes; no other Arab or Muslim public came close.

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in seeing the attacks as legitimate. In surveys conducted by the Arab Barometer in 2006, 2010, and 2012, a higher percentage of Palestinians—on average, three in five—than of any other Arab public consistently agreed with the following statement: “U.S. involvement in the region justifies armed operations against the U.S. everywhere.”

Though I am unaware of any polls asking Palestinians whether it is legitimate to attack Israelis with the aim of securing political or other gains, it is hard to imagine that such attacks would command less support than the three-fifths justifying such actions to defend Islam in general, or to strike at American targets in particular.

2. Does Violence Work?

For a majority of Palestinians, the use of violence against Westerners is seen as a legitimate means of defending Islam or securing political or other gains; but, with respect to Israel, is it also an *effective* means of achieving their goals? On this subject, numerous questions have been asked over the last two decades, both retrospectively about past events and prospectively about the future.

Regarding the past, the picture is fairly clear.

In December 2000, a few months into the second intifada, 69 percent told JMCC that the violence had rendered Israelis more willing to make concessions. A couple of years later, with the conflict having become more violent, similarly high proportions said the intifada had helped Israelis “understand the Palestinians’ demands in order to reach a peace agreement.” These findings were replicated and extended by PSR in 21 polls between December 2001 and September 2006, in which majorities of two to one consistently backed the view that “armed confrontations so far have helped achieve Palestinian rights in a way that negotiations could not.”

Similarly, Israeli decisions to pull out of previously held territory have been seen by Palestinians as a consequence of their “armed resistance” and not as a function of Israeli strategic interests, international pressure, or other factors. This was pointedly true regarding the decision by the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to leave the Gaza Strip. When asked by PSR in September 2005, a month after the pullout, what was “the single most important factor” in the Israeli decision, 57 percent chose “attacks by Palestinian resistance.” Time and again in polls before and after the pullout, three-quarters on average would tell PSR they saw “Sharon’s plan to evacuate the Israeli settlements from Gaza as a victory for the Palestinian armed resistance against Israel.”

The same pattern is discernible in opinions about the three Gaza wars. In December 2012, after the second war, 84 percent responded affirmatively to AWRAD pollsters asking whether “the results of the Gaza conflict will lead to tangible progress toward Palestinian independence,” and despite a slight decline the figure remained robust for months afterward. Following the 2014 war, as I noted earlier, PSR reported that 79 percent saw Hamas as the winner. In

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was the victor.

The same view, moreover, informs the response to questions regarding the future. When asked a few months *before* the outbreak of the second intifada whether “a return to armed confrontations will achieve Palestinian rights in a way that the negotiations cannot,” those banking on violence outnumbered those betting against by nearly 20 percentage points. After the intifada broke out, the gap between the two rose to nearly 50 points. This point was made more explicit [in a 2002 survey](#) carried out by JMCC on behalf of the polling expert Steven Kull of the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland. West Bank and Gaza residents were asked: “Do you think that when Palestinians use violence that injures and kills Israeli civilians this makes the Israelis more willing or less willing to make compromises?” Sixty-four percent opted for “more willing,” and only 17 percent for “less willing.”

When Palestinians look back at sustained campaigns of violence, whether in the second intifada or in the three wars with Hamas, they see them as victories, and they tend to believe that armed campaigns are also likely to be effective in the future.

To be sure, there have been occasions when the majority of Palestinians have looked back at particular attacks and concluded they did more harm than good. In 2010, for example, members of Hamas’s military wing shot and killed four Israelis near Hebron, including a pregnant woman and the father and mother of a family of six children. The attack, which came a couple of days before Israeli and Palestinian officials were slated to launch a new round of negotiations in Washington, shattered a period of relative calm. When asked about it shortly afterward, twice as many respondents predicted it would hurt rather than advance Palestinian interests. Likewise, in polls on a number of occasions between September 2010 and December 2011, a small majority expressed the view that, should armed clashes erupt, they would not have a better chance to bring about gains than would negotiations.

Under certain circumstances, then, a majority of Palestinians conclude that the timing for an outbreak of violence is wrong. But these are exceptions: when Palestinians look back at *sustained* campaigns of violence, whether in the second intifada or in the three wars with Hamas, they see them as victories, and they tend to believe that armed campaigns are also likely to be effective in the future.

3. Is Violence Praiseworthy?

If violence against Israelis is seen as both legitimate and effective, it stands to reason that those responsible for it will be celebrated and admired—and so they are. A case in point comes from the 2011 Greenberg poll, in which respondents were asked to characterize a series of actions as “right” or “wrong.” One such action was the 1978 hijacking of two Israeli buses and a taxi; in the ensuing firefight, the

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poll, a substantial majority, 61 percent, thought it morally “right” to “nam[e] streets after Palestinian suicide bombers like Dalal al-Maghrabi who killed Israeli civilians within Israel.”

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Similar questions have been asked about leading figures known for threatening or using violence against Israel or the West. In Pew studies conducted in dozens of countries and in the Palestinian territories, Palestinians have been the most fervent admirers of, for instance, Hassan Nasrallah, who led the Hizballah terrorist organization against Israel in the 2006 Lebanon war and since then has repeatedly threatened to attack the Jewish state and its citizens. Though absolute levels of support for Nasrallah have varied over the years, the Palestinians outstripped every other people in expressing their confidence in him on the three occasions the question came up.

Although the Palestinian population is overwhelmingly Sunni, Palestinians consistently led others in their admiration not just for Nasrallah but for Shiite Hizballah itself. Within the Middle East, they expressed the highest levels of confidence in Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, another prominent Shiite Muslim known for his repeated threats to annihilate Israel. Moreover, they led the world over the course of a decade in believing that Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks and a vociferous foe of Israel, could be counted on to “do the right thing in world affairs.” In 2011, the last time Pew asked about bin Laden before his death at the hands of American commandos, the Palestinians once again outdid all others in their admiration, just as they did on various occasions in their favorable assessments of al-Qaeda—and (the one time they were asked in a Pew survey) of the Taliban.

IV. Palestinian Support for Armed Attacks

So much for Palestinian views on the foundational issues of the legitimacy, effectiveness, and praiseworthiness of violence. When it comes to the actual question of whether to support particular types of violence in advance, or to express backing for concrete attacks after they happen, what views do ordinary Palestinians hold?

Broadly speaking, from the Oslo accords in September 1993 until spring 2000, a plurality of Palestinians were against most kinds of armed attacks. According to a question posed by CPRS sixteen times during this period, 49 percent opposed “armed attacks against Israelis” and 42 percent favored them. A handful of JMCC polls confirmed this reading of public sentiment.

But a caution is in order. When large numbers are supportive of armed attacks—and 42 percent is a large number—it does not much matter if they are slightly outnumbered by those opposed to such actions. Anyone contemplating an attack can still expect to benefit from a substantial network of backers, and if successful to bring great honor upon himself and his family. Needless to say, though,

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until today, there has been, during most periods, majority support among Palestinians for violence of almost every kind against Israelis.

Anyone contemplating an armed attack can expect to benefit from a substantial network of backers, and if successful to bring great honor upon himself and his family.

For most of the last decade-and-a-half, suicide bombings, which have generally been aimed at civilians and have been the most lethal in their impact, have enjoyed the support of solid Palestinian majorities. On 17 occasions between April 2001 and March 2013, JMCC asked, “How do you feel toward suicide-bombing operations against Israeli civilians?” Supporters outnumbered opponents all but four times, and on average the level of support exceeded opposition by a full twenty points. Breaking down the data further, we see that strong supporters constitute the single largest group, followed by moderate supporters, then moderate opponents and, smallest of all, those strongly opposed.

Although PSR, for its part, did not ask specifically about suicide bombings, on 48 occasions between 2000 and 2015 it did inquire about views on “armed attacks against Israeli civilians inside Israel”; in most cases, supporters outnumbered opponents, with those expressing strong support almost always outpacing, often by as much as six to one, those voicing strong opposition. On the half-dozen occasions this question was asked in the last twelve months, supporters outnumbered opponents every time.

Even higher levels of support have been registered after attacks that succeed in killing Israelis. Whereas an [October 2003 poll](#) by PSR reported 54-percent support for attacks on Israeli civilians in general, when asked about “the bombing operation in the Maxim restaurant in Haifa, which led to the death of 20 Israelis,” the proportion of support reached 74 percent. Parallel leaps from in-principle backing for future actions to after-the-fact support for concrete attacks are reported in polls from September 2004 (after a bomber in Tel Aviv killed 11 Israelis), June 2006 (lethal attack on a shopping center in Dimona), and March 2008—when respondents were asked about “the bombing attack in the religious school in Jerusalem inside Israel . . . in which eight Israeli students were killed in addition to the Palestinian attacker.” For that event, support swelled to 84 percent.

One may speculate about the reasons behind heightened support for specifically named attacks. It may be a consequence of the society-wide adulation of *shahids* (those who die carrying out attacks) during the weeks after they attain bloody martyrdom, of the higher regard for suicide bombings than for other kinds of actions, and/or of enthusiasm for striking Israelis in places of special significance—like Tel Aviv, the symbol of Jewish economic power, or Jerusalem, the focal point of religious contention, or Dimona, the epicenter of Israel’s military might. Whatever the reason, individuals considering such an attack can expect the prospect of even greater honor and celebration than might

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An even larger consensus has favored violence against Israeli settlers, reaching 87 percent on average in polls by CPRS and PSR during the decade ending in 2004. Indeed, since that year, PSR ceased asking about attacks on settlers, perhaps because the answers were already so consistent. But the phenomenon bears relevance to the current round of violence, a substantial part of which has been aimed at Israelis living or traveling in the West Bank. Moreover, in the eyes of the Palestinian mainstream, Jews living in Jerusalem's Old City or in the neighborhoods that Israel captured in 1967, such as Pisgat Ze'ev and Armon Hanetziv, are also considered settlers. Palestinian news reports about the latter, for example, routinely refer to "the Israeli settlement of Armon Hanetziv built on the lands of Jabal al-Muqaber." These areas have been targeted in part because of the relative ease with which the perpetrators (most of whom have hailed from eastern Jerusalem or Hebron) can reach them, but an additional factor may have been the higher level of support for attacking Israelis in such places.

Even more formidable is the societal consensus behind attacks on Israeli soldiers. In a dozen polls between 2001 and 2004, PSR found such support *averaging* 90 percent, with strong backers outnumbering strong opponents by a lopsided fifty to one. This particular feature of Palestinian opinion, about which pollsters stopped asking questions a decade ago, could help explain why so many recent attacks have been aimed at soldiers and policemen.

During the recent wave, moreover, Palestinian support for the favored *modes* of attack has in all likelihood been high as well. In a [December 2014 poll](#), PSR posed the question: "Recently there has been an increase in Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank in attempts to stab or run over Israelis. Do you support or oppose these attempts?" Seventy-eight percent were supportive, only 20 percent opposed. Though the question has not been repeated since then, there is no reason to believe the response today would be substantially different.

V. What Is to Be Done

To sum up: these findings show the degree to which the recent Palestinian perpetrators of violence reflect and are acting on the basis of views widely held in their society. Though they may be lone wolves in the technical sense of not belonging to an organizational command structure, they are anything but alone within their communities. To the contrary, they are surrounded by people who share many of their core beliefs, who justify the attacks they are carrying out, who see their actions as potentially valuable in furthering Palestinian goals, and who can be counted on to venerate them and their families.

These popularly held attitudes also make it difficult for Palestinian officials to limit their own incitement of violence or to deploy security forces vigorously to curb the attacks. So long as Palestinian popular opinion remains where it is, eruptions of violence will always be possible, and once begun can easily and quickly escalate.

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relatively stable for so long, will spontaneously shift gears in the foreseeable future. Nor are there any signs that Palestinian media or religious leaders are rethinking their own, often incendiary role in shaping public opinion. Moreover, the populations of the neighboring Arab states and the media that cater to them—a main reference point for Palestinians—are hardly poised to help bring about positive change. Not only is public opinion in these countries unrelentingly hostile to Jews and Israel, but the Arab world as a whole is suffering a wave of internecine violence, which hardly makes it a model to be emulated.

It's unlikely that a change in Israeli actions will help dampen the situation. A half-century of Israeli restraint at the Temple Mount, for example, hasn't convinced Palestinians that there is no plan to replace the mosques with a Third Temple.

Similarly farfetched, but for other reasons, is the idea that Israeli leaders, by modifying their rhetoric or restraining the reactions of the security forces, can appreciably dampen Palestinian support for violence. Doves might argue that Israel could transform Palestinian opinion in the long term with an offer of a two-state solution more generous than those advanced by former prime ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert (and rejected by the Palestinian leadership). Hawks might contend that change can be brought about by exacting a price for violence and ensuring that it never serves to advance Palestinian interests. But in the short and medium term, neither of these approaches is likely to be effective.

Palestinians view Israeli words and deeds through a powerfully distorting lens. A half-century of Israeli restraint at the Temple Mount has failed to convince most Palestinians that there is no plan to replace the mosques on Haram al-Sharif with a Jewish house of worship. A decade-and-a-half marked by prolonged and intense bouts of violence has persuaded Palestinians that the use of force generally helps them, and many have formed these views based on earlier rounds of attacks against Israelis and Westerners dating back a number of decades. Additionally, a series of confrontations between the West and the Arab/Islamic world has ingrained in most Palestinians a belief that attacking Western or Israeli targets, far from constituting terrorism, is legitimate resistance. Hence, Israel is an unlikely candidate to mitigate Palestinian support for violence.

The onus is therefore on the Palestinian leadership to recognize the dangers posed to its own self-interest by the current volatile circumstances and to take a firm and consistent stance against violence. Of course, there is no expecting Hamas to adopt such a position, which would contravene its organizational ethos and traditions ingrained over two-and-a-half decades. But is it utterly inconceivable that a successor to the eighty-year-old Abbas might do so? Whatever his weaknesses may be—and they have been abundantly on display in recent weeks—Abbas has preached for a decade that violence is not beneficial to the Palestinian cause and has consistently ordered his security forces to cooperate with Israel in quelling armed attacks. This is at least a precedent on which a stronger and more courageous leader might build.

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radical Islamic forces in their neighborhood might have a refreshingly constructive role to play (especially Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia). So might the United States and Europe, which have both an interest in cooling fevers and various diplomatic, political, and financial levers at their disposal. Though Palestinians possess a remarkable capacity to form their own, independent perception of the world around them, they are not immune to the consequences of their actions or to the changing incentives they face. If the U.S. and other Western powers were to begin vociferously condemning violence initiated by Palestinians, to penalize the PA and Hamas until attacks stop, and to ensure that under no circumstances will gains, diplomatic or otherwise, accrue from them, this, too, might exercise a meliorating effect over time.

Palestinian support for violence, and the attitudes underlying that support, have developed and become entrenched over a period of decades. Altering those attitudes can only begin once the attitudes are recognized for what they are, without blinking and without excuses. Toward that end, I hope this essay, along with the broader research project of which it is a part, can serve as a catalyst.

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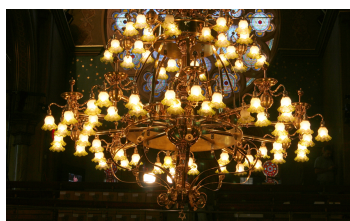
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DANIEL GORDIS



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OFIR HAIVRY

How Palestinians' Vision of Israel Serves Palestinian Needs

themselves.



Palestinian demonstrators hold their national flag and banners during an anti-Israel protest in Gaza City on November 10, 2015. MOHAMMED ABED/AFP/Getty Images.

RESPONSE
HAVIV RETTIG GUR
NOV. 12 2015

About the author
Haviv Rettig Gur is the *Times* of Israel's senior analyst.

Possibly the most surprising thing about Daniel Polisar's essay, "What Do Palestinians Want?," is that the simple question it poses is so rarely asked. In his examination of 330 local surveys of Palestinian opinion on Israel, together with a few more carried out by foreign institutions, Polisar's purpose is straightforward: to see how the Palestinian Arabs, key actors in a century-old conflict, understand events and how their behaviors flow from that understanding. Simple, yes—but a real innovation in discussions of the conflict.

At the outset of his essay, Polisar briefly wonders at the rarity of similar efforts, suggesting that the apparent lack of interest in a systematic appreciation of Palestinian opinion about Israel may flow from "a mistaken belief that public opinion does not matter in dictatorships," or from "a dismissive sense that [Palestinians] are powerless pawns whose fate is decided by their leaders, Israel, or regional and world powers." Out of kindness, perhaps, he omits a more basic explanation: that observers tend to believe they already know precisely what Palestinians think because those purported thoughts are conveyed to them daily by activists and supporters who have taken up the Palestinians' cause.

Whatever the explanation, Polisar's own effort to convey Palestinian public opinion on the conflict with Israel reveals the scope and depth of what has been missing. His implicit argument that "what is happening" on the ground is at least in part happening within the bounds of the Palestinian psyche and discourse rather dramatically shifts the common assumptions of diplomats, journalists, and would-be peacemakers.

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critical or diagnostic depiction of the reality of Israeli society. It is, rather, a vision of Israel that serves distinctly Palestinian needs. To be sure, one can say something similar about the astonishing role played by Israel, for good and (increasingly) for ill, in the consciousness of the West, where the many-layered life of a nation is so often reduced to a caricature through which the moral passions or identity narratives of foreigners can find expression. For Palestinians and Israelis, of course, the consequences that flow from their visions of each other are stupendously high—and so Polisar's painstaking study is arguably a more fundamental and valuable contribution to understanding the conflict than any straight-line history would have been.

In part, this is because of the depth and nuance of his study, which dives deeper than the fairly well-understood facts about Palestinian rejection of Jewish legitimacy in the land and support for violence against civilians. Thus, Polisar shows that majorities of Palestinians believe that Israel actively sought the successive wars it has fought in Gaza, that the inception of those wars was wholly unconnected with Palestinian actions, and that Israel consciously intended to target civilians in those wars and so carries sole responsibility for the suffering that followed. Majorities also believe that Israel is largely or wholly to blame for breakdowns in peace talks with Palestinian leaders, and even that Israel bears primary responsibility for the inefficacy and incompetence of Palestinian *domestic* governance: for the deadly 1994 clashes between PA police and Hamas, for the even deadlier 2007 takeover of Gaza by Hamas, and even for the inability of Hamas and Fatah to reconcile in 2015.

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Israel, that is to say, is at fault not only for the Palestinians' physical conditions—economic underdevelopment, water or fuel shortages, and the like—but also for the failures of Palestinian leaders with regard to their own people and for the homegrown Palestinian political culture of autocracy and schism.

That the intentions of one's enemy, in this case Israel, are believed to be diabolical is perhaps not so unexpected in any inter-ethnic conflict. The same is not true, however, when it comes to Palestinian views of Israeli power. Israelis (and Jews) are seen by most Palestinians as not only ruthless and dishonest but also as strong and clever. At the same time, this evil nemesis is seen, conveniently, as too monstrously immoral to survive. A narrative emerges from these consistent responses: Palestinians are comfortably certain that Israel is the cause of both their dilapidated condition and their inner failings but, luckily, is also doomed to implode, and in not much more than two decades' time.

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Palestinians support such terror, but their support outstrips all other Arab peoples. However much they share the basic perspectives of neighboring Arabs, in this they are detached from the broader politics of the Arab world. That uniqueness is a more revealing finding than the simple fact of their support. As Arab states break apart in sectarian turmoil, majorities throughout the Arab world say they *oppose* violence against civilians, in part because this violence has been so consistently turned against themselves. The Palestinian experience of such systematic violence against civilians, however, primarily consists of the violence they themselves have inflicted on the “usurper” Israelis, not of violence visited upon them by jihadist zealots.

And that’s no accident. It is sometimes whispered among Palestinians that the Israeli enemy, for all his evil ways, at least provides a bulwark against the hordes rampaging through the region. That whisper conveys recognition of a fact: the Jews, in their successful efforts to defend themselves from the collapsing Arab order beyond their borders, also shield the Palestinians from that collapse.

The Israeli left often laments that Palestinian society has yet to produce a leader who grasps the extent to which the fulfillment of Palestinian national aspirations depends on the acquiescence of Israeli public opinion, and thus the strategic imperative for Palestinians to help build trust across the bleeding trenches of the conflict. Polisar’s examination of Palestinian opinion suggests a new reading of this failure. In the Palestinians’ own image of Israel—an entity malevolent in its intentions, overwhelmingly powerful, at once protective of them and a legitimate target for “resistance,” and ultimately destined to fall of its own internal contradictions—they have constructed a mental cocoon, an escape from moral and political agency. Polisar rightly laments the “patronizing” tendency of foreign observers to view Palestinians as “powerless pawns,” but his findings suggest it is not only Westerners who reduce Palestinians to passive figurines, but Palestinians themselves.

Of course, it would be intellectually dishonest to detach these Palestinian sensibilities from hard reality. Israel really is much more powerful than its Arab neighbors, and in ways deeper and more abiding than military might alone. Within that power relationship, Palestinians languish in legal and economic limbo while Israel has surged ahead both in material prosperity and in most global measures of national happiness. Similarly, it is an uncomfortable but undeniable truth that in the wake of the worst bouts of Palestinian violence, broad swaths of Israeli public opinion have tended to swerve toward favoring a final and definitive separation, often through calls for territorial withdrawal. It is hence not really so difficult to understand why Israel might be viewed by outsiders like the Palestinians, unfamiliar as they are with the internal tensions and complexities of Israeli politics, as simultaneously powerful and weak, oppressive and intimidated.

Yet to grant all this is still not to explain why Israel should be seen as guilty of the bloody Fatah-Hamas impasse, or how Palestinians’ explicit support for terror manages to coexist with the conviction of

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can conclude with apparently perfect candor that Jewish nationhood is terminally fragile. In each of these beliefs, borne out in the survey data, Palestinians are using Israel to answer an implicit question about themselves and their condition, and the answer is always the same: we are powerless, and therefore exempt from responsibility.

Polisar concludes that, taken together, these deep-rooted and time-tested Palestinian views place the onus for any movement toward peace on Palestinian leaders who might effect a change in attitudes. Yet the peculiar role that Israel seems to play in Palestinian minds suggests that this may be too optimistic. In Israel, the Palestinians appear to have found not only a real-life culprit for their real-world condition but the phantasm in which they can safely place all of the stymied hopes of their history and all the inner failings of their society. As long as Israel continues to serve as the meta-answer to every discomfiting question, effectively functioning as the Palestinians' internal mechanism for denying their own agency, no alternative narrative has a chance of success. Put simply, too much is at stake.

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